

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

ON S. 360, THE PUBLIC LANDS SERVICE CORPS ACT OF 2013

SENATE ENERGY

**AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND
FORESTS**

April 25, 2013

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 360, a bill to amend the Public Lands Corps Act of 1993 to expand the authorization of the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce and the Interior to provide service opportunities for young Americans; help restore the nation's natural, cultural, historic, archaeological, recreational and scenic resources; train a new generation of public land managers and enthusiasts; and promote the values of public service.

The Administration strongly supports S. 360 which promotes environmental stewardship while providing job skill development to succeed in the 21st century workforce. This bill would strengthen and facilitate the use of the Public Land Corps (PLC) program, helping to fulfill the Administration's commitment to build a 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21 CSC)—a national collaborative effort encouraging young people across America to serve their community and their country. During the last two Congresses, the Department testified in support of similar bills. While we appreciate many of the revisions since the 111th Congress' version that are reflected in S. 360, we would like to have the opportunity to work with the committee on the amendments described in this statement and any additional issues that we identify as we continue our review of the bill.

Engaging America's Youth Through Service

While there are other federal programs that promote service, expanding the use of the Public Land Corps is particularly important because it also serves other high-priority goals. Specifically, enactment of this legislation will help pave the way to meeting one of the goals of the President's America's Great Outdoors initiative – to develop a 21st Century Conservation Service Corps. In January 2013, leaders of eight federal departments and agencies signed an agreement setting up a national council to guide implementation of the Administration's 21CSC – a national collaborative effort to put America's youth and returning veterans to work protecting, restoring and enhancing America's great outdoors. By signing the Memorandum of Understanding, the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, and Labor, as well as the EPA Administrator, Chair of the President's Council on Environmental Quality, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service and Assistant Secretary for the Army (Civil Works) established the National Council for the 21CSC—fully implementing the first recommendation of the America's Great Outdoors Initiative introduced by President Obama in

2010. The National Council works across the federal government to support the 21CSC by enhancing partnerships with existing youth corps programs that utilize PLC around the nation; stimulating existing and new public-private partnerships; and aligning the investment of current federal government resources.

Building on the legacy of President Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression in the 1930s, the 21CSC will help build and train a workforce that fully represents the diversity of America while creating the next generation of environmental stewards and improving the condition of our public lands. The 21CSC focuses on helping young people – including diverse, low-income, underserved and at-risk youth, as well as returning veterans – gain valuable training and work experience while accomplishing needed conservation and restoration work on public lands, waterways and cultural heritage sites.

S. 360 would help both the Department and our sister agencies, USDA and the Department of Commerce, offer expanded opportunities for our youth to engage in the care of America's Great Outdoors, consistent with efforts to fully implement the 21CSC. Additionally, the PLC program helps the Department implement critical cost-effective conservation projects that have direct positive impacts for the agency and the public. This legislation will also help the Department fully implement the 5-Year Plan for Pathways in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM).

Background on Public Land Corps Program

The Department regards the Public Land Corps program as an important and successful example of civic engagement and conservation. Authorized by the National and Community Service Trust Act in 1993, the program uses non-profit organizations such as the Student Conservation Association (SCA) and other service and conservation corps organizations affiliated with the Corps Network as the primary partners in administering the Public Land Corps program. These public/private partnership efforts help to leverage Federal dollars in some cases 3 to 1. In addition, other non-profit youth organizations such as the YMCA also participate, as do local high schools and job-training youth organizations. The youth organizations assist the National Park Service (NPS) in its efforts to attract diverse participants to the parks by recruiting youth 16-25 years of age from all socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The National Park Service makes extensive use of the Public Land Corps Act. This authority is used for the majority of all NPS youth work projects that utilize a non-profit youth-serving organization as a partner. In FY 2012, 1,699 employment opportunities were created through the projects undertaken by these partner organizations. Many of these projects were for maintenance and ecological restoration purposes. The NPS receives a 25 percent cost match from the participating partner organizations. During FY 2012, the NPS spent approximately \$14 million on youth conservation projects that engaged qualified non-profit youth serving organizations. Funding for these projects included Service-wide fee revenue, Youth Partnership Program, Cyclic Maintenance, Repair/Rehab, and park-based funds. The NPS has developed a Cyclic Maintenance/Repair Rehab Youth Initiative that is designed to increase the number of maintenance projects that are performed by youth partner organizations. Once this initiative is fully implemented in 2014, NPS expects to dramatically increase the number of employment

opportunities for youth. Parks have been instructed to identify maintenance projects could be set aside for PLC youth partner organizations. Parks were also asked to identify historic rehabilitation projects that could be performed by youth partner organizations. A special task force comprised of senior NPS facility managers has been formed to implement this initiative.

In 2011, the NPS and the Student Conservation Association began an innovative PLC partnership to introduce college students of color to professional opportunities in the NPS. This year, 72 students participated in week-long orientation sessions at the Grand Tetons National Park and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and in Alaska. These sessions offered a behind the scenes experience of how national park units are managed through seminars, workshops and other hands on activities that focused on the importance of culture, diversity and resource stewardship. They were introduced to the myriad of career opportunities in the NPS that include facilities management, fire and rescue, administration, resource management and visitor education. Those successfully completing their orientation are given the opportunity to serve in a 12-week paid summer internship at a national park site. The interns are provided a NPS mentor who gives advice, guidance and information regarding employment opportunities in the NPS.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) also have a long history of employing young people through the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) and through the Student Conservation Association (SCA) and other youth service and conservation organizations for a wide array of projects related to public lands resource enhancement and facility maintenance under the Public Lands Corps Act. Though most Corps are affiliated with the nationwide Corps Network, they are often administered at the State, rather than national level. The FWS and the SCA have partnered for over 20 years to offer work and learning opportunities to students. In FY 2012, 278 SCA interns and 476 other corps members served in 50 states and 3 territories to help the FWS achieve its resource management goals.

The BLM has engaged the services of non-profit youth service corps for many years under financial assistance agreements at the state and local level. In 2012, the BLM supported 2,100 youth employees through non-profit youth service corps organizations. They participated in a variety of conservation service activities such as recreation and river management, historic building restoration and maintenance, inventory and monitoring of cultural resources, wilderness, rangeland, and renewable energy compliance; native seed collection and invasive species control, and visitor services, including education and interpretation.

In Arizona, as part of Project ROAM (Reclaim Our Arizona Monuments), a crew from the Southwest Conservation Corps spent two weeks rehabilitating and decommissioning up to 10 miles of illegal smuggling roads in the Sonoran Desert National Monument.

In Harney County, Oregon, the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps, which was established by the Oregon Legislature to increase educational, training, and employment opportunities for youth, engaged high school crews in such projects as improving trails, fences, campgrounds, signs, and landscaping. The crews have also removed non-native plants and weeds, cleaned up fire lookouts, and helped install wildlife guzzlers.

The FWS manages 561 units of the National Wildlife Refuge System that cover over 150 million acres of land and waters, as well as over 70 National Fish Hatcheries, which would directly benefit from programs authorized under S. 360. National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries enjoy strong relationships with the local communities, and are involved in many community-based projects that help maintain sustainable landscapes. The FWS's work is also supported by over 200 non-profit Friends organizations that assist in offering quality education programs, mentoring, and work experience for youth.

In 2012, the FWS employed 1325 youth employees through 90 partners that include local, State, and non-profit youth service corps. The FWS also provided funding for a YCC program that hired 709 teenagers. The FWS has working relationships with numerous colleges and universities for students interested in pursuing careers in fish and wildlife management.

The Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2013

S. 360 would make several administrative and programmatic changes to the Public Land Corps Act. These changes would encourage broader agency use of the program, make more varied opportunities available for young men and women, and provide more support for participants during and after their service. Appropriately, S. 360 would change the program's name to Public Lands *Service* Corps, reflecting the emphasis on "service" that is the hallmark of the program. President Obama is committed to providing young people with greater opportunities and incentives to serve their community and country. Through an enhanced Public Lands Service Corps, we would be taking a critical first step that direction.

Key changes that the legislation would make to existing law include:

- Adding the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which administers national marine sanctuaries and conservation programs geared toward engaging youth in science, service and stewardship, as an agency authorized to use the program;
- Establishing an Indian Youth Corps so Indian Youth can benefit from Corps programs based on Indian lands, carrying out projects that their Tribes and communities determine to be priorities;
- Authorizing a departmental-level office at the Department of the Interior to coordinate Corps activities within all the participating bureaus;
- Requiring each of the three relevant departments to undertake or contract for a recruiting program for the Corps;
- Requiring a training program for Corps members and identifying specific components the training must include;
- Identifying more specific types of projects that could be conducted under this authority;

- Allowing participants in other volunteer programs to participate in PLC projects;
- Allowing agencies to make arrangements with other federal, State, or local agencies, or private organizations, to provide temporary housing for Corps members;
- Providing explicit authority for the establishment of residential conservation centers;
- Authorizing agencies to recruit experienced volunteers from other programs to serve as mentors to Corps members;
- Adding "consulting intern" as a new category of service employment under the PLC program;
- Allowing agencies to provide living allowances, as established by the applicable Secretary, and to reimburse travel expenses;
- Allowing agencies to provide non-competitive hiring status for Corps members for two years after completing service, rather than only 120 days, if certain terms are met; and
- Allowing agencies to provide job and education counseling, referrals, and other appropriate services to Corps members who have completed their service.

We believe that the Department's program would benefit from enactment of this legislation. As noted above, most PLC projects are designed to address maintenance and ecological restoration needs, and those types of projects would continue to be done under S. 360. However, this legislation specifies a broader range of potential projects, making it likely that Corps members could become involved in such varied activities as historical and cultural research, museum curatorial work, oral history projects and programs, documentary photography, public information and orientation services that promote visitor safety, and activities that support the creation of public works of art. Participants might assist employees in the delivery of interpretive or educational programs and create interpretive products such as website content, Junior Ranger program books, printed handouts, and audiovisual programs.

PLC participants would also be able to work for a partner organization where the work might involve sales, office work, accounting, science, communication, education, and management, so long as the work experience is directly related to the protection and management of public lands. The NPS and the FWS have a large number of partner organizations that would be potential sponsors of young people interested in the type of work they might offer.

Another important change is the addition of "consulting intern" as a new category of service employment under the PLC program, expanding on the use of mostly college-student "resource assistants," provided for under existing law. The consulting interns would be graduate students who would help agencies carry out management analysis activities. NPS has successfully used business and public management graduate student interns to write business plans for parks for several years, and this addition would bring these interns under the PLC umbrella.

The Public Lands Service Corps would also offer agencies the ability to hire successful corps members non-competitively at the end of their appointment, which would provide the agency with an influx of knowledgeable and diverse employees as well as career opportunities for those interested in the agencies' mission. Such hiring authority is an especially valuable tool for the Department to realize its goals spelled out in the "STEM Education and Employment Pathways Strategic Plan." Refuges and hatcheries, for example, are uniquely qualified to connect with local communities since the Service has so many refuges across the country that are located near smaller communities and can directly engage urban, inner city, and rural youth. For example, partnering academic institutions are beginning to offer academic certificate programs to enhance the students' work experience and marketability for securing full-time employment in both the federal and non-profit sectors, thereby providing orientation and exposure to a broad range of career options.

An expanded Public Lands Service Corps program would provide more opportunities for thousands of young Americans to participate in public service while assisting the Department to address the critical maintenance, restoration, repair and rehabilitation needs on our public lands and gain a better understanding of the impacts of climate change on these treasured landscapes.

Recommended Changes to S. 360

As noted at the start of this statement, we appreciate the changes that have been made since the legislation was first introduced in the 111th Congress, and are reflected in S. 360. However, the Administration recommends the following amendments to this bill:

1) Hiring preference

The Administration recommends changing eligibility for former PLSC participants for non-competitive hiring status from two years to one year. This change would make eligibility status consistent with other Government-wide, non-competitive appointment authorities based on service outside of the federal government.

2) Cost sharing for nonprofit organizations contributing to expenses of resource assistants and consulting interns

Under current law in the case of resource assistants, and under S. 360 in the case of consulting interns, sponsoring organizations are required to cost-share 25 percent of the expenses of providing and supporting these individuals from "private sources of funding." The Administration recommends giving agencies the ability to reduce the non-federal contribution to no less than 10 percent, only if the Secretary determines it is necessary to enable a greater range of organizations, such as smaller, community-based organizations that draw from low-income and rural populations, to participate in the PLSC program. This would make the cost-share provisions for resource assistants and consulting interns parallel to the provisions under the bill for other PLSC participants.

3) Definition of Eligible Public Lands

The Administration recommends technical amendments to clarify the definition of "Eligible service lands" to include non-federal lands. An expanded definition of eligible service lands to include federal, state, local and privately-owned lands would provide additional flexibility in carrying out conservation projects on non-federal lands with willing landowners.

4) Agreements with Partners on Training and Employing Corps Members

The Administration recommends striking the provision in S. 360 that would allow PLSC members to receive federally funded stipends and other PLSC benefits while working directly for non-federal third parties. The need for this language is unclear, since agencies already have flexibility in how they coordinate work with cooperating associations, educational institutes, friends groups, or similar nonprofit partnership organizations. Yet, the language could raise unanticipated concerns over accountability, liability, and conflicts of interest. For example, this language could allow an individual to receive a federally funded stipend under a PLSC agreement, and then perform work for a different non-federal group (such as a cooperating association) that is subject to agency oversight under different agreements. This language could blur the lines of responsibility that have been established in response to IG concerns over the management of cooperating associations and friends groups.

5) Participants/ Terms

The Administration recommends striking the provision in S. 360 that would limit the terms of service of Corps participants. This would retain the authority provided for in current law which provides for administrative flexibility in determining the appropriate length of service for Corps participants.

6) Authorization of Appropriations

The Administration recommends amending S. 360 to eliminate the \$12 million authorization ceiling for the program under existing law. This would allow for an increased funding for the program in the future, as the three Departments increase their use of the Public Lands Service Corps.

The Department and its bureaus, along with its sister agencies are presently working together to: establish a 21CSC; improve federal capacity for recruiting, training and managing volunteers and volunteer programs to create a new generation of citizen stewards; and improve career pathways and to review barriers to jobs in natural resource conservation and historic and cultural preservation. The proposed amendments to the Public Lands Service Corps Act will support these efforts to fully implement the President's America's Great Outdoors initiative.

Finally, the Department of Labor also is reviewing S. 360 to ensure child labor protections apply for participating youth, and will address any concerns it has directly with the Subcommittee.

The Department is happy to answer any questions you or the other members of the subcommittee have.